

The Builder.

No. CCCLXXII.

SATURDAY, MARCH 23, 1850.



THE last of Mr. Weale's rudimentary treatises, namely,—"The Principles of Design in Architecture, as deducible from Nature and exemplified in the Works of the Greek and Gothic Architects," by Mr. E. L. Garbett, Architect,—is a very noticeable work, full of thought, and showing much ability, though with some vagaries. A powerful rebellion against the doctrine of mere copyism has sprung up, and Mr. Garbett is a new and not weak ally. Our question, often put in times gone by,—shall architects only copy?—is finding an answer in the negative in many quarters, in loud, and sometimes not too courteous, tone. Mr. Garbett says No, too, and would point out what they may do instead.

It is not a trifling thing to give freedom of thought;—to strengthen men to speak out when what they feel to be true and right is contrary to the prevailing opinion, and to enable them to throw off habits which are so much more easily acquired than quitted. "What I affirm," says Mr. Newleafe, "is that the true principles of criticism are not comparison with authorities, but abstract test by principles of nature and reason. I say, when you design go to your own intellect to guide your by its regulations—not to books and dogmas and rules of styles; go to nature and the principles of human judgment and taste. 'He who would really become an architect must leave the special discussion of styles, and steadily look to the true end and aim of his art.' So says Professor Cockerell; and it is a gleam of living light appearing in dead darkness when he says so. May it increase and increase till men can see by it! But how strange that it should be so wonderful a thing to find an artist telling artists to go to nature! Vague and weak as are the words, yet hear them, hear them and ponder them—'the end and aim of the art.' The ancients went to nature when they produced those very authorities you go by; the originator of every style in your registry must have gone to nature for his principles; and I say, instead of tethering yourself by these, go you to nature also."

And here we will take the opportunity to say that Mr. Kerr's "Discourses on the Fine Art Architecture," first published in our pages, have not received that acknowledgment from the recent travellers in the same path which the latter owe them.

The plan of Mr. Garbett's little work is said by the author himself to be this:—The first chapter asks what is architecture, and what are the objects at which it aims? In the three following an endeavour is made to deduce from the works of nature, and from the consideration of these objects themselves, some rules and principles which might be expected to conduce to their attainment; and to show that these principles have really presided in the most successful productions of the art. In the last two chapters he examines the two architectural systems—classical and Gothic—concluding with some remarks on the present state and prospects of the art.

After maintaining that all buildings which are planned on simply utilitarian principles—built with no view beyond utility and strength—are not merely indifferent, "but positively hideous and disgusting to the eye," he falls upon the amusing notion that an architectural building is ugly, simply because it looks selfish!

"A great building is, in certain respects, a necessary evil; it shuts out from us air and light, and the view of beautiful nature; it encumbers a portion of the earth's surface, and incloses a portion of the free atmosphere. It has no right to do so without making or attempting what compensation it may, for these injuries. Therefore, the building which makes no such attempt, offends all eyes,—I should rather have said all minds."

Again:—

"A building devoid of architecture displeases all who see it,—all whose share of heaven's light is intercepted,—whose view of the fair earth is bounded by it; because they see and feel that it benefits its owner at their expense;—they have not been thought of in the design; it is all for self, without appearing to care whether they are incommoded or not, or to know that there are eyes without as well as within. It is this crude, selfish rudeness which requires to be softened down by a politeness either natural or acquired, and this politeness we term architecture. It is only one portion, indeed, of the aim of 'architecture proper,' but it is the most indispensable portion, without which all attempts at the higher aims of beauty, sublimity, or definite expression will be totally useless. The building that aims at being any thing more than useful and strong, must first be polite. This is the lowest quality in architecture as distinguished from building."

Every building must show an aim beyond convenience and stability. "If this desire to appear unselfish be wanting, it is waste of time to attempt elegance, waste of money to add decoration; all the graces of Palladio, and all the ornaments of Barry, will avail nothing; the mask will never completely cover you; your real self will peep out somewhere, and spoil all." This is really a little too hard, since it would seem to assert, that although a building be made something more than useful and strong,—has not only "fitness and stability," but "beauty" also,—unless this beauty was expressly given for the pleasure of others rather than the owner, it is still a selfish building, an unpolite structure, and is therefore not architecture. A building erected wholly in accordance with some popular fashion (no matter how wild that fashion may be), and even if quite unsuited to its purpose and the wants of its occupier, must be the perfection of courtesy and politeness—"the first quality in architecture as distinguished from building." The writer thinks his remarks may perhaps "place the question of architecture or no architecture in a light which never struck the reader before." We confess to this ourselves, and moreover that we think the light is a false one.

With the inference of the author we fully agree, have often urged it, though we deduce it from different premises; and we would have it well known and thought of:—

"If, as all admit, it is the mind, and the mind alone, that sees, tastes, feels, likes, and dislikes, objects of art or taste, are not these self-preservative antipathies of the mind to be respected, as well as those of the body? Does not this become a matter not of refinement and luxury, but of interest and duty? Are not ugly objects to be withdrawn as inflicting mental injuries, just the same as a nuisance, a noise, or a stench, which is known to be injurious to the body, because unpleasant? We may laugh at the idea of the mental injury accruing from one glance at an object of bad taste; so we may at the bodily injury from a

passing whiff of smoke: yet we acknowledge a difference between the health and longevity of those who live in smoke and those who live out of it. Habit counteracts and renders us insensible to the unpleasantness, but not the injury. Who, then, shall dare to guess the difference in mental health, between a people living surrounded and immersed in objects of bad taste, or in objects of good taste,—between a people whose works are all utilitarian, and one whose works are all artistic. These extreme cases, remember, are not imaginary. History has afforded examples of both."

The writer continues to press his notion that the spectator must see that the thought bestowed on a building, has been given for him.

"It is exemplified," he says, "by the ornate villas that spring up along suburban roads. Every one feels that, with all their ornamental frippery, their aspect is as uncourteous, as intensely selfish in expression, as that of the 'hole-in-the-wall' house backs, or any other pieces of professedly unarchitectural building. This is because every spectator sees that there has not been a thought bestowed on him. The whole has been designed from within, like the oyster's shell, without the slightest reference to those without; and then they have been sought to be appeased by sticking on ornaments wherever there was a place for them. But this will not do; no one is so easily deceived as this. You cannot 'hide by ornament the want of art,' still less the want of thought and study."

Certainly not, and this is the true reason of the want of pleasure to the spectator: let him see the evidence of design, the result of cultivated thought, and he will not stop to ask whether the thought was bestowed for him or the owner. There is no substitute for thought; and this our author ably illustrates in another part of his work:—

"Among the few that enlist on the side of truth, and resolutely engage in this perpetual conflict against false, against popular, against national taste, it must ever be borne in mind, first, that there is no substitute for thought. All the ponderous tomes of examples, specimens, &c., from Adams and Stuart downwards, have been intended or received for this purpose, and, as such, are not only totally worthless, but extremely prejudicial, though invaluable as materials for analysis, free criticism, and search into principles,—for which purposes they have never yet been used.

Nothing can increase the value of a design, which does not increase the labour of the designer (by designer I do not mean draughtsman). Every reference to precedent should do this, and will do so with every true artist. But the false artist refers to precedent to save himself trouble,—that is, to cheat his employers, by diminishing the value of his work without diminishing its apparent value."

The province of expression in architecture he thinks overrated:—

"To distinguish a club-house from a mansion is beyond the province of expression in any art. It is not to be done by expression, but only by language, and architecture does not pretend to be phonetic. If you want to distinguish the destinations of these buildings, the best way is by writing up their names. It was not always the best way. Hieroglyphics, arrow-headed letters, insignia, coats of arms, were each preferable in their day, simply because they were more extensively understood, and for no other reason. You may make a language of any thing—rustic quins, Gothic windows,—provided people will agree to understand them alike, and take this for church, or that for club-house; but what is the advantage of substituting a new and extremely limited language, understood by very few, for an established and incomparably more copious language, understood by the whole nation?"

Against deception in architecture, he wages proper war; until we can be taught that nothing is beautiful which is not true, we shall find taste a jewel beyond the reach of all England's wealth to buy, and of all her power to win.